

Gliding into a smaller inventory: A reanalysis of diphthongs in Bernese German

Florian Matter
(University of Berne)

As is the case with other Alemannic varieties, work on Bernese German has mostly treated it as one of the varieties falling under the roof of Standard German. This “Germanocentric” approach has led to analyses that make varieties like Bernese look closer to Standard German than they really are. One area affected by this point of view is the Bernese diphthong inventory, which has been described in different ways. Most authors agree about the opening diphthongs /iə/, /yə/ and /uə/ (but see Ham 2001:45). However, the only closing diphthongs treated consistently in the literature are /ɛi/ /œi/ and /ɔu/, which happen to be the ones corresponding to Standard German /ai/, /ɔy/, and /aʊ/ (Keller 1961:92–93, Marti 1985a:45–47, Marti 1985b:39–40, and Ham 2001:45).

I revisit this traditional account of Bernese as having phonemic closing diphthongs from a more neutral point of view and demonstrate that it has certain disadvantages. My main proposal is that it is much more economical to analyze the closing diphthongs as sequences of vowel + glide, for several reasons.

Compared to Middle High German, Bernese has innovated various new diphthongs, stemming from different sources. In addition to these older developments, the rather recent /l/-vocalization (Leemann, Kolly, et al. 2014) must be considered phonemic in today’s non-Oberland varieties of Bernese. The diphthong inventory is thus considerably larger than described above, containing over 30 diphthongs. More importantly, traditional approaches have ignored or downplayed the fact that the second elements of closing diphthongs behave like “fortis” obstruents or long nasals. That is, they show a long constriction duration in intervocalic, post-stress position, considerably longer than the surrounding (syllabic) vowels:

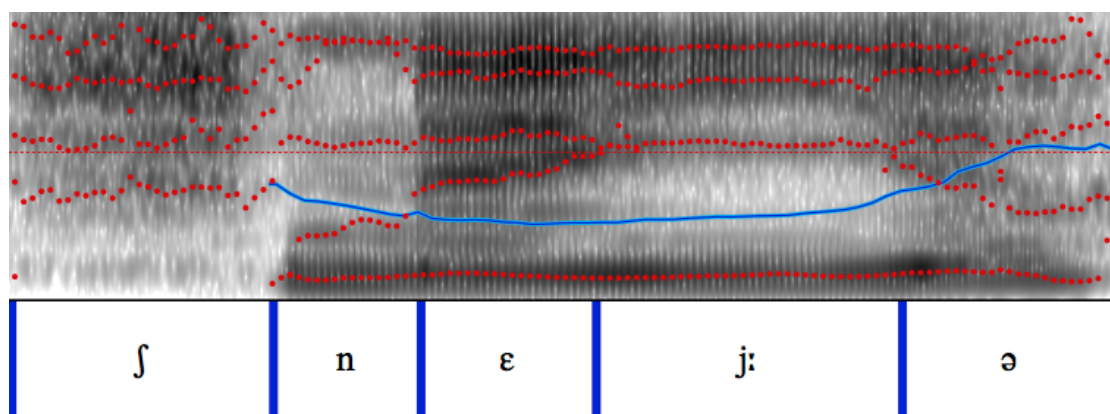


Figure 1: Spectrogram of /ʃnɛj:ə/ ‘to snow’, data from Leemann & Kolly (2014).

The contrast between “fortis” and “lenis” consonants in many Alemannic varieties is one of duration (Fleischer & Schmidt 2006:244–245 and Kraehenmann 2003), making “fortis” consonants geminates, just like long nasals and liquids. Thus, the syllable structures of words like /rɛt:ə/ ‘to save’ with a “fortis”, /rɛn:ə/ ‘to run’ with a nasal,

and /rɛj:ə/ ‘row’ with a glide are identical, with the geminates as heterosyllabic long segments:

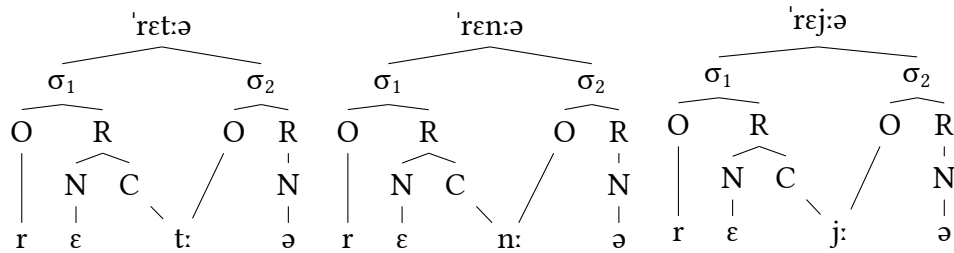


Figure 2: Syllable structures of words with geminate consonants.

Besides being more economical overall, my analysis has the advantage of not simply dismissing or glossing over some of the more peripheral diphthongs, and of acknowledging that the /l/-vocalization has lost its allophonic status. Most importantly though, it highlights the need for unbiased analyses of non-standard varieties and does justice to this variety’s preference for geminate consonants, with which geminated glides fall into line. It also paints Bernese as a rather interesting case of a language with geminate glides. A number of languages with a singleton–geminate contrast do not show it for glides (Maddieson 2008), only allowing singleton glides. This is also the case for Bernese, but unlike these other languages, it has nothing but geminate glides in the position where the length contrast can be made.

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